

Listening as an Act of Love
John 4:7-26

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it was last week Sunday that we started our fall sermon series *“The Habit of Meeting Together”* but this Sunday is when we officially kick-off all of our ministry programs and actually start to meet together again after our last long week-end of the summer.

And the reason we’re focusing on *“meeting together”* this month is to help promote and encourage as many of us as possible to become regularly involved in a Christ Care Group.

Because as I mentioned last week, this is the most effective and efficient way for Valleyview to work on the areas that the NCD survey has identified we need to become healthier in.

You may remember from last week, or from our Annual Growth meeting that our lowest quality characteristic this time around was *“Loving Relationships,”* and as I’ve said before this doesn’t mean we’re an unfriendly church, who need to work on hospitality. Far from it...

What it actually means is that we need to invest more time in developing the kinds of relationships that occur when you are regularly meeting together in a Christ Care Group.

Relationships that are developed through sharing and praying with each other, listening to God speak through the scripture together, holding each other accountable to be obedient to what God says and finding ways to serve others with Christ’s love together...

Ideally – this is what a Christ Care Group is all about, and last week we heard how meeting together around these activities can help us, and others experience all sorts of wonderful benefits in our faith – ideally speaking...

But brothers and sisters, the reality is that we are all fallen, sinful human beings – saved by grace to be sure – but still in the midst of being transformed by the Holy Spirit and the awkward truth is that when you put 5 or 6 or 7 of us Christians together in a small group, and we meet together on a regular basis – it can kind of end up like a Reality TV show at times.

And it's important to acknowledge this friends, because the fact is that a group of 5-7 people doesn't develop close Christian community that is effective and efficient right away simply by virtue of meeting together.

Every group needs to work at this in practical ways when they meet together, and every group needs time to go through the different stages of small group development.

The first few times you meet everyone is going to be on their best behavior – this is the Meeting phase.

After people start to get comfortable with each other they begin to Ask and challenge what this group is really about in discussions or in the suggested activities for the group.

Then either overtly or passively people's behavior will adjust from and they will begin to Test what the group is really about and test the leader of that group.

If the group is able to survive the Testing stage, then they enter into a fruitful stage which they begin to Undertake ministry opportunities to each other and outside the group.

Then the goals of the Christ Care Ministry start to become Realized in this group and the broader church starts to see this occurring as well through their service.

And finally, this realization of undertaking ministry results in growth in the group which necessitates Expansion, meaning the larger group becomes two smaller groups, because a small group – is a small group.

So this is the process that a group 5 – 7 Christians need to go through in order to become a m.a.t.u.r.e group, and over the next three Sundays we're going to look at some specific skills which we can employ to help our groups reach that maturity, and will help us as a church become healthier in our Loving Relationships.

So today we're going to look at Listening – as an act of Love.

Now brothers and sisters the first thing we need to acknowledge is that there is difference between listening and hearing – do you hear what I’m saying?

For example a father might say to his young son, “**Son**, if you want people to say **you’re a good boy**, you have to take responsibility. Now, **I want to raise** you right, so you’d better finish your chores, or you won’t get **your allowance**.

But his son isn’t really listening and only hears, “**Son**, blah blah blah, **you’re a good boy**, blah blah blah, **I want to raise** blah blah blah, **your allowance**!

Now according to communication experts and psychologists, hearing is what happens when sound waves register on our eardrums - but listening is what happens when you pay attention to the meaning or significance of what you are hearing.

So friends, have you ever experienced being heard but not paid attention to?

Have you ever been heard but not understood, or even worse – heard but miss-understood!? That can be very frustrating.

I’m sure you have - especially if you are married and have children.☺ And these relationship contexts certainly demonstrate why listening to each other is so important, because without it relationships don’t function very well.

In fact they tend to break down, and in the scripture passage we read this morning we see that the women whom Jesus met at the well had experienced this kind of relationship breakdown at least five times.

Now, it’s pure speculation that her marriages had all ended because of poor listening skills, but in my pastoral and personal experience I’ve seen that poor listening skills are a big contributor to broken relationships and so I’m sure that it may have played a part for her as it has for many others.

But, what can happen when we employ good listening skills in our relationships?

And let's back the truck up a bit more... and ask do we even know what good listening skills are? And if not where would we learn them?

You see friends; our ability to hear doesn't necessarily mean that we know how to listen.

But, because God has created this world to work in a certain way, we can study things like communication and we can gain wisdom and insight into God's laws for listening, and while it's not the main point of this passage - we do see some of this communication wisdom reflected in Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well.

And not only does it benefit us to discover and use good listening skills, (*husbands if you want to score points with your wives and kids pay attention*) but using them in our relationships with others is a concrete, tangible way in which we can obey Christ's command to love others as He has loved us, just as He showed God's love to the Samaritan woman.

So looking at this situation we see Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at about 6pm in the evening after a long day of traveling.

Jesus was tired and hungry and thirsty, now I don't know about you but when I'm tired and hungry and thirsty I'm not the best listener... because it takes energy and effort to listen.

Yet despite all this, Jesus is willing to do the hard work of listening and engages this outsider in conversation. In fact he leverages the conditions as a context to begin a conversation with her. "*Can I have a drink?*" He asks.

She is startled by His request - because Jews don't talk to Samaritans, nor would a travelling teacher talk to a woman.

So, you have a Jewish rabbi, politely requesting a drink from a Samaritan woman, this sort of thing never happens.

So she responds and wants to know why Jesus is asking this of her?

Now, at this point Jesus could heard her response and just responded in line with the facts of the situation. *“Look lady, I’m tired and thirsty and it not really a big deal who you are and I am, nobody is around so just give me a drink ok!”*

But, Jesus’ intentions towards people are to minister to them, and so as he listens to her response, he discerns an opportunity to minister to her. So he responds to her concern about his identity by dropping hints about who He is.

“If you really knew who was asking you for a drink, you’d be asking him for one...” (vs.10)

Brothers and sisters, what are our intentions towards each other? How do we respond to the people who are speaking to you? Have we simply heard them or have we listened to them?

Do we simply stick to the factual exchange of information, or are we listening for the opportunities to minister to each other

as people speak to us? Are we listening for that which might reveal an opening for us to show God’s love?

Maybe it’s a emotional, physical or financial need they might have? Maybe they are going through some trouble?

It could be they are searching for an answers, or most likely they just need someone – a fellow Christian – to really just listen to them.

So what are our intentions and goals as we listen?

I can tell you that in Christ Care groups the purpose of listening as we meet together is help to draw people out, to get to know them as they share their thoughts and feelings – because that’s how Christ cared.

Please notice that in his conversation with the woman at the well Jesus didn’t try to solve her problems or smooth them over, e.g *“You don’t have a husband...well this is what you should do....”* or

“Hey, its no big deal that I’m a Jew and you’re a Samaritan woman, forget about it, relax...”

Friends, it is a huge temptation for us to do these things when we listen.

I know how easy it can be for me to be listening to someone and before they’ve finished speaking I’ve already diagnosed what’s wrong and I have a solution to fix it.

Now part of that goes along with being a guy - but what I’ve come to realize and what I to be constantly reminded of this – is that when I do this the person I’m listening to doesn’t feel listened to, or loved...

Instead they hear this, *“I don’t really have time or patience to listen to you, I’m going to solve your problem quickly and get this over with.*

Or, if I smooth over someone’s troubling situation or troubled feelings, because I think they should try to stay positive... they don’t feel listened to or loved...

Instead they hear this , “I can’t handle your painful feelings or situation, it makes me uncomfortable. Please don’t bring it up.”

So brothers and sisters, if we are doing this then how can we be obedient to the command in scripture to bear one another’s burdens? (Gal 6:2)

And if I look a bit deeper when I catch myself doing this I have to admit in partly because I’m not really wanting to take the time to listen because I’m being selfish and self-centered.

But thanks be to God that we can confess and ask for Christ’s forgiveness, and when we pray we know Christ is listening to us. He’s doesn’t burden us with suggestions to fix ourselves, or minimize our troubles and feelings, but He really engages us and offers us the forgiveness we need.

So as we remember how Christ listens to us and loves us in this way, the Holy Spirit works in us to enable us to love others in this way as well.

He helps us listen to them patiently, accept their raw and uncomfortable feelings and emotions and not try to fix things or control things in our response.

You see when we listen to people without trying to figure out how to solve things, or smooth over their troubles we also are able to listen to what the Holy Spirit wants to do in the situation as well.

So, when Jesus did this, the Holy Spirit revealed to Him that this woman had been divorced five times and because Jesus shared this information with the woman other doors in the conversation opened up which allowed Jesus to further minister to her and go deeper.

Ultimately he was able to reveal Himself as the messiah to her.

And, later on in the story we learn the knowledge Jesus received from the Holy Spirit that she was living with someone and had been married five times was the proof which allowed her to believe He was the messiah.

In fact we also see that “many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of her testimony, *“He told me everything I ever did”* (John 4:39)

It’s amazing what the Holy Spirit can do in and through us when we are listening.

Jesus ministered to this woman, and through her He ministered to many other people from her town, all because He listened.

But please remember – listening is more than passive hearing

Listening is hard work, it takes time, effort, concentration and these things are often in short supply for most of us with our busy lives and hectic schedules.

Listening not only requires hearing the words people say but also catching the non-verbal cues in their body language.

We need to be fully engaged in listening; actively giving responses that show we are following along.

Asking questions for clarification and responding in order to affirm the other person.

These are all ways that we can show our love, which comes from Christ's love, for other people in listening to them.

Brothers and sisters, we want to see our Christ Care ministry flourish and grow, and we want to see this ministry help Valleyview become even healthier in our Loving Relationships...

But, that won't happen automatically by just getting together... as important as that is...

We need to get together – and do the hard work of listening, as an act of love.

Through this we will discover opportunities to minister to each other and to the community around us.

Through listening we will make space for the Holy Spirit to speak to us and give us wisdom and insight to empower that ministry.

And through listening, we are responding in obedience to our Lord's command - *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (John13:34-35)

Amen.